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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 TBILISI 000800

SIPDIS

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TAGS: PGOV PHUM PREL GG

SUBJECT: GEORGIA: PROTESTS TO CONTINUE BUT STRAINS ARE SHOWING

Classified By: DCM KENT D. LOGSDON REASONS: 1.4 (B) AND (D).

¶1. (C) Summary: Modest numbers of protesters turned out both on Saturday, April 25 and Sunday, April 26 with crowds numbering around 2-3000 and 500-1000 respectively. "Cells" continued to block traffic in front of the Georgia Public Broadcaster (GPB) Building, Freedom Square, the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MOIA), the Chancellery (where the PM's office is located), and Rustaveli Avenue. A concert was canceled on Sunday due to the unexpected death of former Georgian Ambassador to the United States and Switzerland (and Alasania supporter) Levan Mikeladze. In a meeting with the diplomatic corps on April 25, Speaker of Parliament David Bakradze said the government continues to offer dialogue on a range of issues, but the opposition continues to rebuff offers. Protests organizers will announce again on April 27 another "action plan". End Summary.

¶2. (C) Comment: Despite modest crowds and increasing public irritation with the protests, the non-parliamentary opposition presses forward. The makeup of recent crowds suggests a "rent-a-crowd" with a sizable percentage, if not the vast majority, of the protesters believed to be receiving payment to keep the protests ongoing. The financial strains are showing with non-parliamentary opposition leaders calling for donations from the public. Despite their public claims of confidence, offering free concerts and busing protesters in from the regions may be moves of desperation rather than signs of impending success. End Comment.

Protest Numbers Dwindle - Still No Sign of a Plan

¶3. (C) Like a broken record, the non-parliamentary opposition promises a "new action plan" to be unveiled April 27 although all signs indicate that they have no plan other than to give more speeches and call for more protests. The MOIA put Saturday's numbers at roughly 2300 protesters which one Embassy observer described as a "rent-a-crowd". Roughly 500-1000 protesters with the same "rent-a-crowd" look showed up in front of Parliament on a beautiful sunny Sunday afternoon. Freedom Square, the road in front of the GPB, the State Chancellery, and MOIA buildings remained blocked with only a handful of protesters (5-15) manning the "cells," though buildings can be accessed on foot. Sunday's protest might have drawn a larger crowd because of a planned concert; however, the death of Alasania ally and former diplomat Levan Mikeladze led the organizers to cancel the event. (Embassy Note: Mikeladze died of an apparent heart attack or stroke at home on Sunday morning. Most of the non-parliamentary opposition did not appear at the protest on Sunday, instead paying their respects to Mikeladze's family. End Note.)

¶4. (C) On the margins of a government-hosted reception celebrating Georgia's tenth anniversary as a member of the Council of Europe, Deputy Ombudsman Giorgi Chkheidze told the DCM that he worried that both sides were stuck in a dead-end game. He thought that it was important at this stage for the Government to make a concession up front, and that offering a

dialogue at this point was not enough. Chkheidze said that the concession would have to come in an important area like judicial reform or law enforcement, but he did not have a concrete idea. When asked whether the opposition would respond positively to a Government concession, Chkheidze said that he frankly did not know.

Protests Proving to Be Expensive
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¶15. (C) Koba Davitashvili (Party of the People) informed protesters that the non-parliamentary opposition would put boxes out at the rallies and he publicized a bank account number for donations. Estimates vary, but most put the cost of constructing the mock "cells" in the range of 200,000-300,000 USD. Reports of protesters receiving 35 USD plus lunch a day means that the non-parliamentary opposition is spending a substantial sum of money every day to continue the protests. (Embassy Comment: Assuming only 500 protesters are being paid, the cost would be nearly 20,000 USD a day not counting paying for flags, banners, sound systems, electricity, transportation from the regions etc. End Comment.) It has been widely rumored though not confirmed that Nino Burjanadze has been footing a large portion of the costs of the protests from her personal wealth.

¶16. (C) The French Ambassador told the DCM that he met with Kakha Kukava (Conservatives) on April 26 at Kukava's request. Kukava asked the French Ambassador to arrange a meeting for opposition leaders (unclear which ones) to meet with EU Ambassadors, indicating that the opposition was ready to talk about finding a way out of the deadlock with the Government. The EU planned to meet April 27 to discuss whether or not to

TBILISI 00000800 002 OF 002

take up Kukava's offer. In other EU news, EUSR Semneby and EU Ambassadors issued a joint statement on April 24 (emailed to EUR/CARC) commanding all sides for the peaceful exercise of the right of free assembly and calling on all sides to abide by the law. In a separate statement, French Ambassador Fournier charged that blockage of roads and government buildings by protesters was not legal and lamented that the government was forced to hold official meetings in hotels.

Bakradze Leaves the Door Open

¶17. (C) In a diplomatic corps briefing held at the Sheraton due to access issues at Parliament, Speaker of Parliament David Bakradze said the government still was seeking a dialogue with the protest leaders. Bakradze outlined three baskets of areas for discussion: internal political reform, economic, and security issues. Bakradze said that he has approached a number of academics and other opinion makers and experts regarding participation in reform groups. Bakradze said the GoG had proposed a "no-agenda" meeting with the non-parliamentary opposition through EUSR Peter Semneby in order to create the opportunity for a frank and open discussion. Bakradze said the format would have allowed the non-parliamentary opposition to save face by claiming the discussion was to center around Saakashvili's resignation. He lamented the response to the meeting was to have relative moderate David Uspashvili (Republicans - Alliance for Georgia) read a terse statement rejecting any dialogue and denouncing the GoG. Ambassadors at the briefing applauded the government's efforts in handling the protests and openly questioned whether Tbilisi should be held hostage to the demands of a radical few. Bakradze said the GoG was not going to wait forever for the non-parliamentary opposition to agree to dialogue but, he noted, the door would remain open for them.

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